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Acknowledging the Role of White Privilege and Racism

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Disproportionate Representation of African American Students in Special Education: Acknowledging the Role of White Privilege and Racism

by Wanda J. Blanchett

This article places the problem of disproportionate representation of African American students in special education in the context of the White privilege and racism that exist in American society as a whole. The author discusses how educational resource allocation, inappropriate curriculum and pedagogy, and inadequate teacher preparation have contributed to the problem of disproportionate representation. More important, she argues that remedies designed to address the disproportionality challenge must place the aforementioned structural forces at the center of education research, policy, and practice.

Although the field of special education was formed on the heels of the *Brown* decision and applied rhetoric and tactics from the Civil Rights Movement, the disproportionate referral and placement of African American students in special education has become a discursive tool for exercising White privilege and racism. First, African American students are disproportionately referred to and placed in the high-incidence special education categories of mental retardation, emotional or behavioral disorders, and learning disabilities (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Second, once labeled as having disabilities and placed in special education, African American students make achievement gains and exit special education at rates considerably lower than those of White students identified as having disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Third, although the field of special education has moved toward more equitable treatment of students with disabilities by advocating for inclusive general education placement as common practice, many African American students who are placed in the less subjective, low-incidence categories of developmental disabilities are educated in segregated, self-contained settings with little or absolutely no exposure or access to their nondisabled peers or to the general education curriculum (Fierros & Conroy, 2002). These realities suggest that “race matters,” both in educators’ initial decisions to refer students for special education and in their subsequent placement decisions for students identified and labeled as having disabilities (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002). Moreover, the persistent state of African Americans in special education seems to suggest that even in a system that was supposed to serve some of the most marginalized students in the American educational system, the White privilege and racism that are ingrained in the fabric of American history and society are equally prevalent (Shealey, Lue, Brooks, & McCray, 2005).

“White privilege” as it exists in American society or in the American educational system is defined as any phenomena, whether individual (e.g., biased teacher attitudes/perceptions), structural (e.g., curricular and pedagogical practices geared toward White, middle-class students), political (e.g., biased educational policies), economic (school funding formulas that contribute to inequity), or social (social constructions of race and disability), that serve to privilege Whites while oppressing people of color and promoting White supremacy (McIntosh, 1990). “Racism” is defined here as individual, structural, political, economic, and social forces that serve to discriminate against and disadvantage people of color on the basis of their race for the purpose of maintaining White dominance and power (Bell, 1992).

In this article, my goal is to extend the existing literature by illustrating how the problem of disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education is not just a special education issue or concern but, instead, must be viewed in the context of the White privilege and racism that exist in American society as a whole and in the educational system, specifically. For this purpose, I discuss how White privilege and racism contribute to and maintain disproportionality in special education by (a) insufficiently funding schools attended primarily by African American and poor children; (b) employing culturally inappropriate and unresponsive curricula; and (c) inadequately preparing educators to effectively teach African American learners and other students of color. I will show that, to effectively address the problem of disproportionality, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers must place inequitable educational resource allocation, inappropriate curriculum and pedagogy, and inadequate teacher preparation at the center of education research, policy, and practice.

What Is Disproportionality? Why Should It Be a Major Concern?

Disproportionality exists when students’ representation in special education programs or specific special education categories exceeds their proportional enrollment in a school’s general population. For example, African American students account for only 14.8% of the general population of 6-to-21-year-old students, but they make up 20% of the special education population across all disabilities (Losen & Orfield, 2002). They are 2.41 times more likely than White students to be identified as having mental retardation, 1.13 times more likely to be labeled as learning disabled, and 1.68 times as likely to be found to have an emotional or behavioral disorder (Klingner et al., 2005). These high-incidence diagnoses typically are made by school personnel after the child has started school, relying on a subjective referral and eligibility determination process

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that varies from district to district and from school to school within the same district. Because the judgments in high-incidence categories are subjective and can vary greatly across settings and professionals, misdiagnoses and disproportionality occur more often in those categories than in the low-incidence disability categories. Low-incidence disability categories (e.g., severe or multiple disabilities, deaf or hard of hearing, deaf/blindness) typically involve medical personnel and have more clearly defined eligibility criteria and methods of diagnosis. However, regardless of whether they are placed in the low-incidence and supposedly less subjective categories or in the high-incidence categories, African American students still experience fewer positive outcomes than their White peers. The in-school and post-school outcomes of African American students who are placed in special education programs are more likely to be characterized by segregated special education placements, limited access to the general education classroom and to peers without disabilities, high dropout rates, low academic performance, and substandard or watered-down curricula (Ferri & Connor, 2005b). After African American students exit special education, most commonly by dropping out or receiving a certificate of attendance, they experience high unemployment rates, lack of preparation for the workforce, and difficulty in gaining access to postsecondary education (Chamberlain, 2005).

Although a number of factors have been identified as contributing to disproportionality, few attempts (e.g., Artiles, 1998; Patton, 1998) have been made to situate those factors in the context of larger societal and sociological phenomena such as the cultural construction of disability, disability categories, and conceptualizations of individual difference. Even fewer attempts (e.g., Ferri & Connor, 2005a) have been made to establish oppression, White privilege, and racism as contributing to the problem of disproportionality. However, the connections between race, economic status, and disproportionality have indeed been established in the literature (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Losen & Orfield, 2002).

Intent of Special Education Versus Special Education for African Americans

In theory, special education was conceived to provide much-needed educational support that was not being provided in general education for students with disabilities. In its original and subsequent conceptualization, special education was not a place or location but rather a service delivery structure (The Civil Rights Project, 2001). This service delivery structure was supposed to provide individualized instruction to students who were identified as having disabilities on the basis of an objective referral, assessment and evaluation, eligibility determination, placement, and exit process (Blanchett & Shealey, 2005). Once students' needs were met or appropriate strategies or modifications implemented, the students would be integrated into general education settings. In reality, special education has not worked out this way. For many African American and some poor students, special education has become a form of segregation from the mainstream (The Civil Rights Project, 2001). In fact, special education has become a mechanism for keeping many African American students from receiving an equitable education in the general education environment (Losen & Orfield, 2002). As a result, some scholars (e.g., Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002) have referred to special education as a new legalized form of structural segregation and racism.

Insufficient Funding for Schools Attended by African American Students

Because insufficient funding for schools attended primarily by African American students may increase the likelihood of their receiving an inadequate general education and hence being referred to special education, improving the quality of general education for these students might decrease their chances of being placed in special education in the future (National Research Council, 2002). There are a number of possible ways to improve the general education experience for African American students, but sufficiently funding the schools they attend to ensure that they have access to equitable learning opportunities must be placed at the top of the list. Notwithstanding numerous lawsuits, students in the American educational system are not all served equitably. As Jonathan Kozol (2004) points out,

In Illinois, after many years of legal action, inequalities remain intractable: The children of all-Black East St. Louis receive a public education worth \$8,000 yearly, while the children of Lake Forrest, a predominately White suburb of Chicago, receive \$18,000. In New York City, despite a victorious legal action brought by the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, per pupil spending (\$10,500) remains half that of the rich Long Island suburb of Manhasset, where some \$21,000 is invested yearly in each child's education. (p. 23)

In those rare instances where urban schools are funded at the same level as wealthier suburban schools, other forms of educational inequity are apparent, including uncredentialed and inadequately prepared teachers, curricula devoid of rigor, and inadequate physical structures (Darling-Hammond, 2004; National Research Council, 2002). While most people would acknowledge that these inequities in public school funding do occur, the reasons they would offer for them would probably vary. Few would attribute the inequities to structural systems of White privilege and racism, because the Whites whose children attend high-quality public schools feel entitled to the education that their children receive, often at the expense of poor African American and other students of color (Brantlinger, 2003). Moreover, White privilege and racism operate in such subtle yet insidious ways, which benefit Whites while oppressing people of color, that the situation is perceived as being just a way of life for Whites (Bell, 1992). The truth of the matter is, as McIntosh (1990) says, that "Whites are carefully taught not to recognize White privilege" (p. 1); and they often do not see themselves as racist because they may also have been, as McIntosh says she was, "taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of a group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on [Whites] from birth" (p. 4).

White privilege and racism have resulted in at least four subsystems of American public schooling as a whole. The first is a general education system for children who are (a) disproportionately White, and (b) perceived to be "normal" or without disabilities. These students often attend schools where teachers are highly educated and credentialed, meaning that the teachers were not hired with emergency licenses and often hold a master's or higher degree in the subject area that they teach (Blanchett et al., 2005; Robinson & Grant-Thomas, 2004). More important, these students are exposed to a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum, including advanced placement classes, travel-abroad programs, access to three or more foreign programs, the latest technology, and state-of-the-art science labs (Brantlinger, 2003).

The second subsystem in the American educational system is general education for children who are (a) disproportionately African American or of color (Orfield & Lee, 2004), and (b) perceived to be “normal” or without disabilities. These students are likely to attend schools that are deemed high-poverty and that have high turnover of teaching and instructional staff, a high number of uncertified or provisionally licensed teachers, limited or no access to technology, one or no foreign language programs, few educational specialists (e.g., in math, science, or reading), few advanced classes, and no travel-abroad programs (Kozol, 1992; Orfield & Lee, 2004).

The third subsystem in American education is special education for children who are (a) disproportionately White, and (b) perceived as having disabilities. These children may be prejudicially perceived by some as “not normal” but may be of varying ability, some requiring no supports to excel academically and to participate in all facets of life, and some requiring extensive, ongoing support just to maintain life and certainly to acquire academic skills. These students are more likely to be fully included in general education classes at the schools described above in the first subsystem, meaning that all of their educational supports—such as special education services, physical therapy, speech and language therapy, and occupational therapy—are provided in the context of the general education curriculum. These students are not pulled out or segregated from their nondisabled peers for services (LeRoy & Kulik, 2003). Many of them graduate from high school with a “regular” high school diploma; typically, they are the students with disabilities who go on to postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

The fourth and final educational subsystem is the special education system for children who are (a) disproportionately African American, and (b) identified as having disabilities. These children may be prejudicially perceived by some as “not normal” and, like their White peers described in the third system, may be of varying ability. However, unlike their White peers, they are often excluded from inclusive education programs and the general education curriculum (LeRoy & Kulik, 2003). They tend to spend 60% or more of their school day in segregated special education placements, meaning that they participate in general education classes for no more than 40% of their day and may spend their entire school day in separate classrooms or separate schools from those attended by their nondisabled peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). They are also more likely to have uncertified or provisionally licensed teachers and to graduate with a certificate of attendance or completion rather than a high school diploma (Chamberlain, 2005).

To properly address the problem of disproportionate representation, school funding systems must be reformed to ensure that *all* students have access to high-quality learning experiences in general education environments prior to being referred and placed in special education (Kozol, 2004; Robinson & Grant-Thomas, 2004). Until high-poverty urban schools have an infrastructure that will allow all students to learn and have access to a college preparatory curriculum, whatever their race and socioeconomic status, it may be necessary for states to develop a differential system of school funding that enables schools to develop appropriate supports for students that do not require them to fail before they can receive assistance by being referred for special education.

Employing Inappropriate and Culturally Unresponsive Curriculum and Pedagogy

Because institutional and individual social phenomena play a role in special education referral decisions, it is critical that we examine the extent to which White privilege and racism play a role in the curricula and pedagogical practices employed with African American students in general education environments prior to their referral to special education. Despite theory and research (e.g., Apple, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1999) asserting that the mainstream curriculum (“the official curriculum”) and pedagogical practices in use in American schools are inappropriate for use with African American learners and are purposefully employed to maintain White supremacy, these curricula and practices are still being used. In fact, critical race theory has referred to the “official school curriculum” in American schools as “Master Scripting” (Swartz, 1992). Master Scripting is defined as the dominant culture’s monopoly on determining the essential content of the official curriculum and subsequently the pedagogical practices used to deliver it.

Master Scripting is employed at both the institutional and individual levels to mute the stories and voices of African Americans and thereby prevent their counter-voices and counter-storytelling from challenging White authority and power (Ladson-Billings, 1999). On the recent passing of Rosa Parks and on many prior occasions (especially Black History Month), Master Scripting “reduced [Parks] to a tired seamstress” (Ladson-Billings, p. 21) who refused to give up her seat because she was tired. Her defiant and blatant act of protest against Southern “Jim Crow” laws was not recognized. Similarly, Master Scripting allows for the omission of Malcolm X from public school studies of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, or, when he is included, enables educators to portray him as less worthy of recognition because he did not employ the same tactics as Dr. Martin Luther King and accordingly is less palatable to Whites. African American students in American schools not only have to contend with White privilege and racism in the form of curriculum content, distortions, omissions, and stereotypes, but also are confronted with a curriculum that lacks rigor and that ultimately sets them up to be referred for special education and eventually to fail (Ladson-Billings). Scholars (e.g., Foster, 1994; Irvine & York, 2001) have removed the “Emperor’s Clothes” with regard to the American public school curriculum to illustrate that the curricula in use in schools attended primarily by African American students are void of emphasis on critical thinking, reasoning, and logic. The failure to afford opportunities for African American students to develop those essential skills is likely to contribute to their being referred and placed in special education at much higher rates than are White students, who are indeed provided with access to a rigorous curriculum and to gifted-and-talented programs. In fact, some contend that schools and educators refuse to employ culturally responsive curricula and pedagogical practices because culturally responsive curricula place the learner at the center of what takes place in classroom settings and accordingly challenge the existing power structures in schools (Nieto, 2000).

Ensuring that African American students have consistent access to rigorous curricula goes hand-in-hand with providing them with culturally appropriate and responsive curricula. In fact, when African American students, as well as students identified as having disabilities, are placed in detracked classes where they are

exposed to a rigorous curriculum and high expectations, the achievement gap between White and African American students is greatly reduced (Burris & Welner, 2005). Nonetheless, many suburban White parents object to heterogeneous grouping of their children with “other people’s children” out of fear that their children will also receive a “watered-down curriculum” (Brantlinger, 2003; Burris & Welner). More important, these parents object to exposing African American students and other students of color to the same rigorous curriculum as their White middle class children because doing so threatens their privilege and sense of entitlement (Brantlinger; Burris & Welner).

Inadequate Teacher Preparation

In seeking solutions to the persistent problem of disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education, we must first focus on better preparing teachers to address the needs of ethnically and culturally diverse students. Improving teachers’ capacity to provide culturally responsive instruction to African American students is likely to improve student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2004), and the higher quality of education that these students receive in general education may decrease the likelihood that they will eventually be placed in special education (Harry & Klingner, 2006). Despite numerous calls for the infusion of multicultural education in teacher preparation programs (e.g., Banks et al., 2005) and the fact that NCATE and other accrediting bodies have diversity standards that all accredited institutions must meet, teacher preparation programs continue to graduate and credential educators who are not prepared to effectively teach African American and other students of color. Teacher education candidates continue to exit their programs with many of their prior negative perceptions of “Blackness” and their prejudice, racism, and sense of entitlement regarding White privilege intact and completely unchallenged (Gay, 2000). Unfortunately, because of the proliferation of fully credentialed educators seeking employment in wealthier suburban school districts, many of these teachers with their unexamined and intact White privilege and racism eventually end up teaching African American and other students of color in metropolitan areas where there are significant teacher shortages. These negative perceptions of African American students and of their “Blackness” are likely to become evident in the learning environment and to affect the extent to which teachers believe these students can or will learn and their decisions to refer or not to refer them to special education (Sleeter, 1993).

In a larger study of issues that influence disproportionality, from which Blanchett et al. (2005) was derived, parents of color provided valuable insights into how educational professionals’ negative perceptions of “Blackness” can play out in the special education referral and placement process. The two quotations that follow here were recorded during focus group discussions conducted on March 17, 2001, for that larger study, although they did not appear in the published article by Blanchett et al.:

[Disproportionate referral and placement of African American students in special education] has nothing to do with economic status. . . . It’s just like the taxi driver. You could have a very high economic status African American male standing up there waiting for a cab, but because they see the fact that he is African American first and sometimes that’s all they see, it wouldn’t make a difference if he stood up there with a briefcase in his hand and a suit, or if he was out there in jeans and his baseball hat turned to the side. The

fact that he is Black would make them say no, you’re not getting in this cab. So the fact that [our children] are Black says you are supposed to be in this program [special education] so they’re referred and placed in special education. (Transcript, p. 2)

Educators tend to see Whiteness as the norm and consequently the academic skills, behavior, and social skills of African American and other students of color are constantly compared with those of their White peers. In sharing his experience with White privilege and racism in the special education referral and placement process, one parent said:

The norms are “White” [and] everything else is [considered] “deviant.” African Americans are told they don’t meet the norm. A lack of conformity [to White norms] suggests to teachers that the student is not “normal.” . . . These tests are biased. . . . That is one reason why the African American children were not passing these proficiency tests. . . . They were written for the majority community. (Transcript, p. 4)

The existing body of literature on the current state of teachers’ preparation for educating a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse population suggests that much more must be done to ensure that teachers not only are prepared to educate whoever comes into their classrooms but also are prepared to deconstruct institutional as well as their own White privilege and racism (Sleeter, 1993). By deconstructing issues of White privilege and racism in the American educational system, teacher education candidates can better understand how their perceptions of “Whiteness,” “Blackness,” and “color-blindness” affect their interactions with students whose race differs from their own (Sleeter). Above all, assisting teachers and teacher candidates in deconstructing issues of White privilege and racism should decrease the likelihood that these issues will negatively influence teachers’ decisions to refer African American students for special education or to advocate restricted special education placements.

Conclusions

The problem of disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education is a complex and persistent one that must be examined in the context of larger societal and social phenomena. Additional research is needed to clearly document the ways in which White privilege and racism create and maintain disproportionality at all levels (e.g., the individual, institutional, educational, research, policy, and practice levels) and to develop appropriate strategies and interventions to eradicate these practices. Finally, additional research is needed to develop research, policy, and practice interventions that are designed to address issues of inadequate allocation of educational resources, employment of inappropriate and culturally unresponsive curricula, and inadequate teacher preparation, and to examine their impact on the problem of disproportionality over time and in a variety of settings.

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